Japan: Winter Wildlife Spectacular Tour Report 2024

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'The Fox and the Eagle'. When we talked of this encounter afterwards, it was as if we were describing one of Aesop's Fables: the wily vixen hoping to snatch a meal from one of the eagle lords of the sky.

Yet this incredible encounter – between a snarling Ezo Red Fox and an imposing White-tailed Eagle, on a patch of frozen lake – was just one of the highlights on this year's Wild Images tour to Japan; a trip renowned for being awash with iconic nature experiences.

For some on the tour, few wildlife wonders could beat the sight of almost a thousand Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles (two of the world's largest raptors) dotted across the horizon – while occasionally clashing – over ice floes off the frozen coast of Hokkaido.

For others, their highlight was the pure charm of photographing baby Japanese Macaques, aka 'Snow Monkeys', bathing and swimming in hot springs, as heavy snow fell silently around.

But for me, I will forever be moved beyond words by the unparalleled beauty of the courtship dance of the Red-crowned Cranes. A masterpiece of avian elegance, these striking birds bow, encircle each other, leap 5ft in the air, and arch their backs – before bugling, their beaks held skyward.

It is a genuinely magical sight – amplified, on this year's tour, by the sheer numbers of Red-crowned Cranes that appeared in the fields of Hokkaido.

Other highlights included the world's largest owl (the Blakiston's Fish Owl) swooping out of a snowy hole; a charismatic Sable, and various encounters of Hokkaido's sub-species of Long-tailed tit, aka 'Snow Fairy' or 'world's cutest bird.'

With the main tour, and its extension, covering three of the largest islands of Japan's sprawling archipelago (via a brief foray into Tokyo) this particular Wild Images itinerary doubles as a hefty introduction to the diversity of Japan.

Add in stays in traditional Japanese guest houses – complete with deeply-relaxing volcanic-warmed onsen baths – and a wealth of intricately-prepared local dishes, served by the occasional robot waitress, and it also serves as a culinary and cultural adventure.

Despite Japan this year experiencing a record-breaking winter warm spell, partly attributed to the enduring spasm of the Pacific Ocean's El Nino effect, we were lucky enough to have sea ice on all FOUR eagle boat trips; a feat that is, by no means, one to take for granted.

And the snow in Hokkaido was plentiful enough to achieve many 'Fine Art' style images with the Red-crowned cranes; a creative photographic endeavour for which numerous Wild Images clients have gone on to achieve gallery showings and competition accolades.

The Pre-Tour Extension: Kyushu's World-famous Gathering of the Cranes

Our pre-tour extension began at Tokyo's Haneda Airport, with an early-morning flight to Kagoshima, a city on the southerly Japanese island of Kyushu.

After picking up our cavernous mini van, and being properly introduced to Otani-San, our Japanese co-guide and birding expert – who would stay with us for the entire tour – we drove through the misty verdant hills and villages of this island, bound for the famous wintering grounds of thousands of cranes at Arasaki.

Kyushu itself spreads out around the giant active volcano of Mount Aso, which forms one of the largest calderas in the world.

Along with the island's proximity to the warm Kurishio ocean current, these two factors meant that our few days here were the warmest of our tour (although sadly also rather rainy, this year).

Arasaki itself is a farming area of flooded paddy fields that lie on the fringes of the coastal city of Izumi.

It serves as a lifeline for the thousands of cranes – mostly Hooded and the very-graceful White-naped – that steadily gather from breeding grounds in Russia and northeast China. As they migrate past the Korean Peninsula, the flocks swell in size, before alighting in Arasaki – a patch of reclaimed land west of the broad Iwashita River – for winter.

On the hour or so drive to Arasaki's paddy fields, we stopped for a car picnic at one of the country's many 7-Eleven roadside stores, which would become a frequent lunch stop for the duration of our tour.

Japan's convenience stores – complete with the dizzying options and culinary novelties they contain – are almost a cultural experience in their own right.

From experience, Wild Images clients either adore the vast array of choices they offer, finding fascination in the almost countless sushi, bakery, noodle and snack options.

Or they tire of wandering the aisles, in a daze of bafflement or option paralysis, with their mini basket. My advice: lap up the oddity of different dishes, push your culinary boundaries, don't overdose on chocolate Macadamia nuts and, if all else fails, have a cheese or egg sandwich.

On arrival at the Arasaki Crane Observation Centre, the notice-board informed us that, at the last count (just two weeks earlier) 12,972 cranes had arrived at the fields this year; almost 3,000 more than last year!

These included 9,583 Hooded Cranes (an increase of 2,000 from the previous winter) and – in particular – 3,373 stately White-naped Cranes (believed to be the largest recorded here in several years.) A solitary Siberian Crane, 8 Common, 2 Sandhill and 1 hybrid also made the recent roll-call.

In a year that followed the loss of more than 1,000 cranes to bird flu, we couldn't believe this turn-around – or our luck.

The story of the Arasaki locals' relationship with cranes is an emotive one.

Back in the 1950s, only 300 visiting cranes arrived each year – a sharp population decline. The people of Arasaki and Izumi, many of them desperately poor themselves in the post-WWII years, set about feeding the birds corn, gradually enabling numbers to swell to the thousands.

More than 80% of the world's Hooded Cranes now winter here, with recent estimates of half of the world's remaining 5,000 White-naped – that have suffered from decades of habitat degradation – doing the same.

Due to their protected status, the cranes are fed in large netted-off areas, making the best chances for good photography to either stand on the large flat balcony of the visitor centre, or drive along the network of tiny roads that weave through the paddy fields and outer canals for close-up portraits of family groups – or to catch flocks taking to the skies.

Our arrival coincided with a near-continual drizzle of rain. But most of us, nevertheless, achieved portrait shots of the stately White-naped cranes, which are much taller than the Hooded. Standing at nearly 1.3m high, White-naped feature pearl-grey droopy wing feathers, a red face and eye, and a white stripe running from the crown and down their necks.

We also quickly found, and photographed, the solitary Siberian Crane, an endangered species, together with a Black-faced and Eurasian Spoonbill feeding on a nearby canal.

Checking in to the traditional Ryokan (Japanese style guest-house) next to the Crane Observation Centre, we left our bags and either tried to catch up on our jet-lagged sleep or photograph more cranes.

Unlike some of the more luxurious accommodation in the main tour, this family-run inn, with traditional Japanese tatami mat beds, is – undeniably – an austere place. Yet it cannot be beaten for location, with the bugling of thousands of cranes audible from the rooms.

And it was at dawn, the following morning, that the true spectacle of Arasaki revealed itself. Thousands of cranes first gather for grain feeding on one paddy field, before flying the half mile or so to the paddy fields in front of the Crane Observation Centre.

Despite drizzle and fears of total cloud cover, the sunrise lit up a large patch of sky over the nearby hills and mountains, turning it pink and orange just as ribbons of cranes peeled into the air amid a cacophony of trumpeting calls.

To see any bird species – particularly one as graceful as these Hooded and White-naped cranes – en masse and flying in concert with each other, is nothing short of a wonder.

These two dawn events, where thousands of cranes flew overhead (sometimes so close that we'd struggle to frame more than two without cutting off a wing) are undoubtedly the highlight of this pre-tour extension.

Particularly on the second morning – when successive flocks of Mallards, Northern Pintails, Crows, then Hooded and White-naped Cranes circled the fields – we were able to try a variety of shots; both slow-shutter speed 'panning' and as many different kinds of flight shots as we could think of.

However, the view from the observation roof, and at ground-level by the netting, is not without its challenges. Particularly as recent post-Bird Flu regulations have seen the farmers spreading corn much more widely to try and avoid crane overcrowding.

The paddy fields themselves can reflect a lot of light and be untidy, while the sheer numbers of birds makes for crane chaos. Every time a great shot presents itself, it can be quickly ruined by a flock moving into a different focal plane.

Yet, with patience and a willingness to try different creative techniques, Arasaki can provide an invigorating photographic experience.

In amongst the flocks, client David later spotted two Sandhill Cranes, while we also notched up Common Crane sightings, bringing our Crane species tally here to five.

After the morning flight spectacle, we filled our time at Arasaki by driving around the network of canals and paddy fields that made up the reserve. Occasionally, we spotted White-naped Cranes beginning to dance – although these brief displays proved tricky to photograph.

We were also rewarded with other birding sightings, including Black-eared Kites, an Osprey, Kestrel, Medium Egret, Little Grebe, Durian Redstart, a Eurasian Kingfisher – and a variety of Corvids and waterfowl species.

During one lunchtime break, we also visited a row of beautifully restored Samurai houses, belonging to the aristocratic warriors who once guarded the gates of the nearby city of Izumi. At the adjacent museum, the group had a blast dressing up in Samurai costumes. Who says grown-ups can't lark around in fancy dress on a rainy afternoon!

And following our crane session on our last morning, we started our journey back to Kagoshima airport for the short flight, and a night in the Royal Park Hotel, Haneda, ahead of our main tour.

The Main Tour Begins: Tokyo and Falling Snow at the 'Snow Monkeys'

Our main tour kicked off after breakfast in the lobby of the Royal Park Hotel at Tokyo's Haneda International Airport, as we trekked into the heart of Tokyo to catch the bullet train to Nagano.

I say trekked, because navigating Tokyo's metro and monorail system – hulking bags into lifts and up escalators (while trying to not use the wrong ticket, of a multiplying number of tickets, at the automated gates) – can be a physical challenge.

Yet travelling by Japan's iconic Shinkansen train (with a top speed now of around 320 km/h) is by far the quickest way to reach the 'Snow Monkey' park. And with snow only set to fall in Nagano on this particular afternoon, I was keen for the group to have a full afternoon recce with these iconic primates.

Added to this, one of the very loveliest members of our group had sadly contracted Covid, so we all moved to take preventative measures, and navigate this as best as we could.

For some group members, the Monorail journey into Tokyo was their first experience of this megacity – the world's most populous metropolis with an urban area of around 37 million people.

I, personally, have always adored Tokyo – with its mix of chaos and order; of ultra-modern and occasional cultural impenetrability.

It seemed to take no time at all before the airport monorail skimmed into Tokyo. Two metro changes later and we were on the platform awaiting the bullet train to Nagano, known to many of us as the host of the 1998 Winter Olympics.

The Shinkansen – as ever – was punctual to the second. And, within no time at all, we emerged from the train, just as heavy snow began to fall.

A quick coffee-stop and hire-car collection later, and we were driving through the suburbs of Nagano and towards the small hot spring village of Kanbayashi Onsen.

The Jigokudani Monkey Park forms part of the Joshinetsu Kogen National Park, set in the valley of the Yokoyu River.

Our base for three nights here was the nearby Ryokan Biyunoyado, a hotel with traditional Japanese-style rooms (think soft rush-woven Tatami floor mats, a comfortable futon, low table and green tea and sweet accoutrements, and balconies with mountain views.)

The hotel also served as an entry point for two of the mainstay cultural features of our tour: the early-evening onsen experience (for those who enjoy hot spring bathing) and the multi-course Japanese feast.

As far as the onsens go, admittedly, it can feel a bit daunting to bathe naked with strangers. Divided into male and female spas, these hot spring baths typically feature one or more inside pools and an outside one where you can sometimes find yourself bathing amid the steam as snow or soft rain falls around you.

But – particularly in the wintry north of Hokkaido – these deeply-relaxing baths can be a place to both properly warm up or share conversation.

The nightly dinners – and also the beautifully presented breakfasts – were frequently taken in our own private dining room and cooked in front of us on a type of super-charged tea-light grill, setting the stage for what we would experience throughout the trip.

Known locally as *kaiseki* (a traditional multi-course Japanese meal) these intricate dishes are infused with the shokunin spirit, with chefs seeking the virtue of perfection in their craft.

Usually beginning with plates of sashimi or variations of tofu and yam, the small dinner plates would pass through rounds of rice, miso, often four or five incredibly healthy fish, meat or vegetable dishes and onto other courses that can occasionally be baffling.

Arriving to quickly change and leave our luggage, on our first afternoon, we grabbed a quick convenience store lunch before heading up to see the monkeys.

Japan's famous 'Snow Monkeys' are wild Japanese Macaques that live around the Jigokudani valley, which literally translates as 'Hell Valley' due to the region's intense geothermal activity.

Getting up to the park entrance from the car park involves a good 40-minute hike through a serene snowy forest; mostly easy-going enough but with some steeper sections of hill and steps – and some frozen patches that can require holding on to the wooden handrail.

The woods form part of Japan's 'Nihonkai Montane Forest' – dense, deciduous mountain forest characterised by endemic beech, cherry, Katsura and hornbeam trees.

And on that first afternoon, the snowfall became so heavy that it was hard to focus on the bathing Macaques. And we were also mindful not to get our camera gear too wet, with the damp air also steaming up viewfinders.

Yet experiencing falling snow at the Snow Monkeys is by no means a given (or even so frequent an occurrence) so most of us were keen to spend at least two hours in the falling snow, in an attempt to get the best images we possibly could.

For the following two mornings we hiked up to the Monkey Park after breakfast, making sure we were the first to arrive at the entrance, spotting Jays, and stray Macaques in the last section of the woods.

Japanese Macaques are highly intelligent monkeys who already displayed some interesting behaviour even before one of them – a juvenile known as 'Tokiwa' – dived into a hot spring following a fallen apple, back in the 1960s.

Tokiwa seemed to enjoy this bathing experience so much that other monkeys followed suit and the behaviour spread to the entire troop.

Not only are Japanese Macaques the most northerly living non-human primate, but their troops are matrilineal in construct. Dominance passes from mother to daughter, and troops are led by both an alpha male AND alpha female. (Human primates, take note.)

They are also the only non-human primates where grandmothers have been observed raising abandoned grandchildren. And these Macaques also partake in some other fairly cool auxiliary activities – such as rolling snowballs for fun and washing food in fresh water before then dipping it in salt to enhance the taste.

Up in Jigokudani, it's easy to forget that the monkeys are all wild. Population numbers here first plunged following the building of the ski resort in the 1950s.

But now troop numbers here stand in excess of 280 monkeys.

I tried in vain to count the large number of newly-born infants and juveniles, while staff at the monkey park provided small amounts of barley seed to supplement the troop's natural food-finding activities.

Our two and a half days at the monkey park proved to be a good amount of time to really get some interesting images. The morning session tended to last between 9am-midday, when we would seek out some lunch, and all of us were ready to leave by 4pm, just as the park began to close for the day.

It's a challenge to capture a monkey, mid-air, as it either jumps into the main spring bath, or leaps out, shaking droplets from its fur,

As well as the action of the main pool – where monkeys get so close that several either jumped over me, as I crouched down, or sat just just inches away – favourite spots included the lower river (where macaques chase each other and leap from boulders) and along the bridge, where all manner of fighting and grooming activities take place along the snowy banks.

For lovers of portraits and behavioural shots, there are opportunities for some really emotive images. Juvenile macaques have such thick hooded fur coats that they almost resemble little humans in fur coats, or Ewoks from a Star Wars movie. While the expressions on the faces of many of the more habituated monkeys makes for impressive close-ups.

Despite my continual scanning of the hills, we had no Serow sightings this year. But group member Karen and I did see a family of sleeping wild boar, after finishing our noodle soup in the small Onsen restaurant near the main monkey park entrance.

On to Hokkaido and the frozen North – for the spellbinding dance of the Red-crowned Cranes

The next morning, we retraced our journey back into Tokyo. I planned the return journey to allow for enough leeway to give around two and half hours' free time (after stashing our luggage) in the region of the capital around Tokyo Central station.

Half of us strolled over to the gardens of the Imperial Palace – the main residence of the Emperor of Japan – taking in some Tufted Ducks swimming in the moat, before heading to a small bar for Plum Wine and beer.

Others lunched at a lovely French bakery (whose location I stashed in my mind from last year's tour) before taking the monorail back to the airport for our evening flight to Hokkaido.

As the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago, this great northern island receives more snow than any other location at this latitude on earth.

Home of the great Daisetsu Mountain range – and to ten of Japan's most active volcanoes and peaks – Hokkaido is known as 'The Playground of the Gods' by the island's indigenous Ainu people, because so many god spirits join the brown bears roaming on its slopes.

And most of northern Hokkaido experienced continuous permafrost in the last ice age, giving it a very different feel from the rest of Japan.

Subarctic conifers, such as Ezo Spruce and Sakhalin Fir, fill forests along with hardy deciduous, such as Japanese Birch and Beech.

To the south lies the green choppy watchers of the Tsugaru Strait, while Hokkaido's northeastern quarters slam into the Sea of Okhotsk, whose waves eventually wash up on the coast of Siberia.

Hokkaido is home to some of Japan's most spectacular wildlife. But, for us, the first port of call were the feeding grounds of *Grus japonensis*: the iconic Red-crowned Crane.

After arriving at our spa hotel and base at dinner time, we primed ourselves for three days focused on capturing the best crane shots that we humanly could – beginning with an early start to join the throngs of photographers that gather, almost daily in the winter, on Otowa Bridge.

This river bridge is a world-famous landscape location. It overlooks a Red-crowned crane-roosting section of the Setsuri River that has enough geothermal activity to not freeze.

And if you're lucky enough to get a hoar frost – mist rising, and sun burning through to reveal the cranes dancing below – it can, indeed, yield stunning shots.

But there are several variables that can make the experience land on the right side of magical, or a wildlife photographers' version of a bit of a bunfight.

Firstly, you need to get there early. Before ariving in Hokkaido the following evening, I'd been worrying about the unseasonal warm temperatures. The previous year, I'd been clearing the snow from the car in temperatures of -23 degrees C (-9.4 F).

This year, when leaving our spa hotel at 4.30am, the temperature gauge read – 7 degrees C (19.4 F). Still chilly. But nowhere near the same ballpark.

By 5am, the bridge was lined with tripods: mostly from a large group of landscape photographers whose tripods were chained to their chosen position and watched over by a lone guide, standing guard, as the photographers stayed warm in the cars along the road.

This actually turned out to not be so much of a problem. Not only was the bridge nowhere near as bone-chillingly cold as previous years, but it was also noticeably less busy; perhaps as the fervour of Japan re-opening after Covid had died down a little.

Even so, locals reported that – for the past year – the cranes have taken to roosting much further along the river, and were staying longer in the river before flying to the feeding grounds, meaning decent shots are best achieved using lenses of 400mm and more.

Despite this, we had a beautiful hoar frost on our first morning at the bridge, while our second attempt yielded far more dancing activity from the birds.

Hearing the cranes waken in the mist, bugling to one another before beginning to dance – with wings raised and backs arched – is a sight unfailing in its magnificence.

The glorious Red-crowned Crane, or 'Tancho' – known as the 'God of the Marshes' – is one of the largest crane species in the world, and second only to Whooping Crane of North America as the rarest – with estimated numbers left now coming in at approximately 3,000 individuals.

Until the late nineteenth century, the killing of the Tancho was reserved for nobility, who hunted it with falcons. After this time, Japan's Meji restoration made slaughtering the bird a free-for-all.

Wiped out completely in Honshu, only a remnant band of 25 remained in Hokkaido. This tiny flock, already half-starving, only survived the harsh freeze of 1950 by farmers putting out grain.

Since then, several winter feeding stations and a ban on killing cranes have restored the Hokkaido flock to its current numbers of around 1,700 – making it the best site in the world to see these graceful birds.

The main focus of these conservation efforts is the 104-square mile Hokkaido marsh, which starts at the fishing town of Kushiro on the coast and spreads up to the Akan Mountains.

Our days here were centred around two main sites: the snowy fields of Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary, and the Akan International Crane Reserve, both around 45 minutes' drive apart.

And if you're a photographer who enjoys trying Fine Art style images, spending hours with the Red-crowned crane can tip you into overdrive with potential compositional options.

Traditionally, the bird is perceived as an emblem of the ying-yang of existence: the combination of the black neck, legs and secondary wing feathers, combining with white head and wings, topped off with a blood-red crown, are a metaphor for 'All That Is' in Japanese cultural lore.

And after leaving Otowa Bridge an hour or so after sunrise on our first morning – and refuelling with hot coffee and pastries – we reached the famous Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary in good time before the 9am grain-feeding.

At our first morning feeding session, the light was already quite harsh, and the snow somewhat trammelled from the cranes' feet. But the sight of more than 200 cranes – in family groups or sometimes up to five together – flying over the birch trees to arrive at the farm, was nothing short of wonderful.

Often, cranes dance shortly after landing. As well as the classic deep bow and arch of their courtship dance routines, Red-crowned Cranes arch, circle each other and leap up to 5ft in the air, before bugling together, with their beaks held skyward.

Their graceful routine is undoubtedly one of nature's most compelling wildlife spectacles.

In amongst the Red-crowned Cranes – for all our time crane-watching at Tsurui – we continually spotted a lone White-naped. We saw this confused-looking bird again and again, over the next few days, occasionally trying to join in the dancing, and frequently being chased away by the others.

Over the next few days, many of us tried every combination of portrait and action shot technique: High Key images, slow shutter speed, isolating tiny features, shooting video; even some in-camera Multiple Exposure.

As well as the main site at Tsurui Ito, we spent a lot of time at the Akan Crane Observation Centre. This location is enjoyable not only for its relaxed 'almost-free-of-other photographers' vibe, but because it enabled us to get within metres of up to 100 dancing cranes – as well as a large flock of Whooper Swans that rested in the fields before banking off, honking over silvery-trunked trees of Japanese White Birch.

Some of our best lunches were also enjoyed at Akan, sun streaming through the restaurant windows, cranes bugling from the field nearby.

We were also incredibly lucky with the large numbers of Red-crowned Cranes that we continually saw – noticeably more than previous years. In fact, so many cranes danced simultaneously, at times, that it was difficult to know which to focus on. Additionally, the large numbers gathering at both Akan and Tsurui made it difficult to get clean shots.

But for a species with only around 3,000 individuals remaining in the wild, to be able to report on the large numbers of birds here is a privilege, indeed.

Yes, we had one particular day where the light was harsh and backlit – but on the next we had 20 minutes of falling snow at Akan.

Rotating between Tsurui Ito and Akan on our full crane days, we stopped at a woodland site that's home to a very photogenic Ural Owl roost, with one dozing inside the huge hole of an ancient oak tree.

And walking along the quiet road through the trees, we were able to photograph Jays, several Lesser-Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers and a pair of beautiful Asian Rosy Finches.

Back in the Tsurui village, we were also able to enjoy a lovely cafe / gift shop with a whole window of glass looking out to bird feeders – enabling us to enjoy coffee while watching the occasional flock of everyone's 'cutest' Hokkaido subspecies: the fluffy-feathered Long-tailed Tit, known locally as 'Shimaenaga' ('Snow Fairy).

Lake Kusshаro: Whooper Swans and Volcanic Vents

After a third full morning with the Snow Cranes at Tsurui Ito, we pressed on to Lake Kusshаro, a vast caldera that gives it the accolade of largest crater lake in Japan.

En route, we stopped at a second Ural Owl site, this one even closer to us and set in a Narnia-style wooded forest just metres from the parking spot. Luckily, the Owl was roosting outside its tree hole – perfectly positioned for a quiet photo of its beautiful plumage.

Yet our target species for the next two photoshoots were the famed Whooper Swans of Lake Kussharo.

Each winter, large numbers of these impressive swans escape the cold of Siberia and northern Mongolia (their summer breeding grounds) and migrate to this beautiful snowy hill-backed lake in Hokkaido – making it a magnet for photographers.

The lake surface freezes in the middle, but the water closer to the shore functions as a bath for the swans, due to the volcanic-based thermal springs, with the resulting steam often giving way to incredibly atmospheric shots.

Worryingly, recent reports had announced that – due to this year's unseasonably warm temperatures – the lake hadn't frozen, for the first time in living memory.

Yet pulling up at the lakeside base of Kotan Onsen, we found that the main body of the lake had finally – just recently – frozen solid. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The afternoon light was bright, while the steam from the spring appeared like mist, acting like a softbox for the flock of Whooper Swans gathered in front of us. And with our shots backdropped by some of the lower-slung hills of the Akan Mashu National Park, this is undoubtedly one of Japan's most gorgeous locations.

We spent more than an hour trying a variety of close-up and wide-angle shots, before heading along the lakeshore at Sunaya – hoping to grab lunch at the restaurant.

Frustratingly, the eatery had closed early, but we managed to sit down for tea and cakes at a beautiful and serene coffee shop, further along the small town. Many group members spent time photographing the numerous small birds – such as the Pale Thrush, Willow Tit, Marsh Tit, Japanese Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Jays – that flocked outside the window.

Arriving at our guesthouse later that afternoon, we quickly checked in before heading back to Kotan Onsen, to photograph the swans at sunset.

Our Lake Kussharo accommodation – the Gasthof Papilio – is run by a very gentle elderly couple, with our group the only guests. To me, staying at this serene woodland homestead feels like an imagined holiday in the Canadian lakes; peaceful, restful, and with the garden home to all manner of wildlife.

That night, we ate a delicious dinner in the guesthouse's cosy dining room, surrounded by piles of books, maps and embroidery projects.

The next morning, I headed out alone before sunrise to see if there was a chance of nice light at the swans before returning to rouse the whole group. There wasn't, and the swans were still roosting, but the lake still had a hugely serene feel, this early in the day.

Before breakfast, some of us wandered down to the lakeshore at Sunaya, while others stayed to photograph the tree squirrels and a variety of woodland birds, mostly Japanese Pygmy and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a variety of tits.

I find it's always a wrench leaving the Gasthof Papillio (with its atmosphere of calm and freshly-brewed coffee.) But we had a date – that night – with the world's biggest owl.

En route to our next main destination of Rausu, we stopped at the Mount Iozan Volcano viewpoint, home to a gift shop with a staggeringly high number of 'Snow Fairy' souvenirs and unusually-flavoured ice cream. More significantly, the viewpoint was right by the steaming sulphurous vents and neon-yellow deposits of the active Mount Iozan Volcano.

Despite being rather diminutive (by volcano standards), it's still worth a wander up to the vent to try for some interesting shots.

Rausu: Sea Eagles and Giant Owls along the 'End of the Earth' Peninsula

Driving into Rausu – the largest town on the eastern coast of Hokkaido's Shiretoko Peninsula – has the feel of a place accustomed to bitter weather and the hard graft of generations that rely on sea-fishing.

This view perhaps isn't helped by its name: Rausu is an indigenous Ainu word roughly translating as 'Place of men with beast-like spirit.'

Hokkaido's Shiretoko Peninsula itself is a jutting landmass and pristine national park whose name literally means 'End of the Earth'. In 2005, it was given an UNESCO World Heritage status, due to its abundance of wildlife and marine ecosystems.

The peninsula is not only home to one of the densest populations of brown bears in the world (sadly all currently hibernating) but the region's winter-time drifting sea ice generates huge blooms of phytoplankton that then support a bounty of marine, bird and mammal life.

It is also regarded as the world's last 'safe havens' of one of nature's most impressive owls, a species known locally as 'Shima-fukuro' but elsewhere as the Blakiston's Fish Owl.

Classed as the world's biggest living owl, in terms of combined weight (up to 4.6kg for the larger females) and wingspan (reaching almost 2 metres – 6ft 7in), this species is experiencing huge issues due to habitat loss due to logging in old-growth riverine forest.

There are now believed to be fewer than 1,000 pairs of these great birds remaining in the wild.

The best place in the world to see the Blakiston's Fish Owl is considered to be the small Rausu guesthouse of Washi No Yado, whose owners have encouraged the survival of these great owls by leaving frozen fish in a snowy pool in winter.

We quickly checked into our nearby hotel – with incredible wrap-around sea view rooms – before tucking into an early seafood dinner above the local fish-market, so we could arrive at Washi No Yado before 6pm.

At the guesthouse, the main viewing point for the owl hole is in the long-windowed (high-quality glass) restaurant that stands directly opposite the river bank. Most of the group set up their gear by the windows, fuelled by tea and coffee from a nearby table.

But together with one other group member, I opted for the second viewing option: an empty small school bus, on a slight angle to the pool and heated by a fan heater.

The guesthouse logbook noted that an owl had turned up at 1am the previous night, and then again around 3am. The previous night had a sighting at around 11pm, but some nights show no owls at all.

Washi No Yado's snowy bank is lit by strobe lights that flash at around 1/90 of a second – but the recommended camera settings to accommodate this – and avoid black banding in your images – are a shutter speed of 1/80, aperture of 5.6 and ISO of approx 3200. Which, with a bit of tinkering, seemed about right.

The first few hours of night rolled by before there was a sudden flash of orange, that didn't have the feel of our anticipated giant owl. An Ezo Red Fox had appeared on the snowy bank before diving into the pool, making off with a large fish! Another 20 minutes rolled by and the opportunistic fox appeared again- this time chased away by one of the owners.

Finally at 11.55pm, a male Blakiston's Fish Owl appeared on the branch outside, its hulking frame making for a truly impressive sighting. Within a few minutes, he had flown into the snow hole, grabbed the fish and flown out; eyes like saucers and giant wings outstretched.

We held our breath as he sat, fish clasped in claw, before swooping off again into the darkness.

The owl appeared again – an hour later, at just before 1am, this time sitting on a branch for five minutes before swooping in to grab another fish. So when the female owl (larger than the male) appeared shortly afterwards, sitting away from the strobe lights and too dark to photograph, we had hopes of a third great encounter.

But – probably wary due to the commotion coming from another group entering the viewing area and one individual talking loudly on his mobile phone outside – after an hour, the owl had not moved one inch. Overcome with tiredness, with clients having spent almost eight hours in the restaurant or bus already, I finally called time on our venture.

Due to our late night with the owl – and with our first two boat trips booked for the day after – we had a relatively free next day, consisting of lunch at the fishing market again and a tour of Rausu's harbours looking for seabirds and ducks (while waiting to check-in to our next hotel; a cosy boutique-style place with excellent food, right by the harbour.)

We returned to Washi No Yado in the afternoon, spending some time photographing the Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles flying into the trees overhead, and enjoying the antics of a small Brown Dipper.

The itinerary of our Wild Images Japan tour allows for three full days in Rausu. Mainly because of the temperamental behaviour of the much-desired pack ice, whose existence in the Nemura Strait – off the coast here – has a huge bearing on our sea eagle experience, and whose presence is dependent on everything from temperature and sea currents to wind direction.

The window for this sea ice to appear can be narrow, and members of other tour groups who arrived, just a week before, told of their bad luck at experiencing no ice at all.

Fortunately for us, the ice had apparently arrived just a few days before we drove into Rausu; visible as a great floating white sheet that constitutes the most southerly drift ice in the northern hemisphere.

In fact, newspapers worldwide had – just three days earlier – carried the story of a pod of Orcas that had become suddenly trapped here, as the ice quickly moved in.

On the following morning, we boarded our small boat before dawn; one of around ten that took to the sea, each chugging out to its own portion of ice, for an experience that constitutes many a wildlife photographer's dream.

Against a beautiful golden sunrise, a boat-worker threw fish to encourage the eagles down.

First came the Steller's Sea Eagle – one of the biggest eagles in the world by weight – and hugely distinctive with their hooked orange beaks and feet, heavily white-feathered legs, and bold pied colouration of dark brown / black contrasting with white.

If cartoonists for The Simpsons were tasked to draw an eagle – the Steller's would surely be what they came up with.

Shortly afterwards, the White-tails swooped in, more masterful than the Steller's in stealth, and agility.

This year's eagle numbers were so numerous that, the following morning, I counted a combined total of more than 800 Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed dotted towards the horizon; a truly dizzying number of subjects that made us all burn through our memory cards and barely pause – despite the biting cold.

Our second boat trip of the morning, just 45 minutes' later (giving us time to grab a quick breakfast and coffee and warm-up) was just as spectacular. Chances of action shots and portraits, both with eagles on the ice and over the hills of Rausu, were plentiful.

Other seabird activity included Slaty-backed Gulls, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, together with a Japanese Cormorant.

In the afternoon, we drove up to the Notsuke Peninsula – a 28 km long frozen sandback that connects with the Shiretoko, and is known for its bird life. Temperatures, by now, had risen to an unusually toasty 12 degrees C (54 F); a far cry from last year.

At our noodle restaurant lunch, we were served by a cheerful robot waitress who delivered our meal and wished us a lovely day. It is oddities like this that make Japan such a fascinating country to visit!

Pressing on, we focused on photographing Sika Deer and then trying to find the Ezo Red Fox, who have been known to hunt small rodents by jumping high into the air, before plunging head-first into the snow.

The Notsuke Peninsula itself makes for an other-worldly shard of wilderness. Ice floes roll onto the beach on one side, while the flat sandback extends far towards the horizon, scattered with snow-bound fishing boats, reed grass and the occasional shoreside lonely cottage.

As we neared the park's visitor centre, Sika Deer appeared along the roadside. However, we were less lucky with our fox sightings here this year.

Despite searching around the fishing boats, one wild fox was too timed to stay around long,, and a less nervous individual (who approached our vehicles) was sadly suffering from a skin condition.

On our homeward journey, we spotted a fox in the distance caught in fishing wire, and duly reported it to the nearby wildlife visitor centre, with the promise a specialist would help.

The following day, a lengthy snowstorm was predicted to roll in after lunch. But, fortunately, both of our eagle boat trips took place on the ice, each one equally spectacular in its own right.

The Wild Images Japan tour is, as far as I know, the only wildlife photography trip that books FOUR eagle boat trips – enough to allow for cancellations or lack of sea ice – and to ensure enough time to truly capture the magnificence of the Steller's Sea Eagle and the White-tailed Eagle diving and duelling in the skies.

That afternoon, right on schedule, the heavy snowstorm rolled in, giving us (finally) time to rest up or download images.

As we left Rausu, the following morning, we saw that the ice sheet had shifted – relegating boats to the harbour-side – while great flakes of snow still drifted down.

We spent another few hours along the Notsuke Peninsula, photographing Sika Deer and sea ice, before visiting more harbour-sides for shots of Black Scoters, Mergansers and Lesser Scaups.

Pressing onwards through some lovely snowy landscapes, we arrived at the most luxurious accommodation of our entire tour: the wonderful Nakashibetsu-based Yoroushi Onsen.

While some of the group headed for an onsen bath, others opted to sit in front of the lounge's giant glass windows photographing a number of birds: from Eurasian Jays to woodpeckers and Long-tailed Tits, attracted by the hotel's bird feeders.

This spa hotel also has a reliable fishing pond and a resident Blakiston's Fish Owl – with the sightings logbook reporting the owl was regularly putting in an appearance on the decking's fish platform (just two metres from the hotel's windows) at around 7-8pm and then again at 3am-ish.

As I headed down for our early dinner booking at 6pm, I noticed I was the only one who had arrived at the table. Running to the lounge, I saw that the impressively vast owl had obliged us with a viewing, just before dinner.

The owl was too close for my first-choice lens. And the photographic experience was slightly marred for others, due to the reflection in the glass of the drinks bar behind and the scrabble for a view. But it remained a good encounter.

A few members of the group stayed up as late as tiredness allowed, hoping for another owl sighting – with one member capturing a Sable (a Hokkaido sub-species of Marten).

Rising at 4am the next day, group member Karen and I were lucky enough to photograph this charismatic small mammal too – a first for me! – as it scurried around the decking and snow, hoping for fish scraps.

On our final morning, we regrettably left this fantastic hotel before breakfast for the 90 minute drive to the frozen Lake Furen, where fishermen leave out fish scraps for a mass of eagles and Black Kites.

As we drove, the sunrise was glorious, with lines of beech and fir trees casting great shadows across the snow as the sky turned orange.

Before arriving at Lake Furen, I was aware that this photographic opportunity may not happen today. The lake had not frozen solid as normal in previous years, and there were safety fears for the fishermen who normally stroll out onto the ice.

However, a slice of ice near the shoreline was solid enough for two fishermen to head part of the way onto the lake with some fish – and we were rewarded with the sight of dozens of White-tailed Eagles and diving Black Kites, circling and swooping overhead.

With some Steller's Sea Eagles joining the throngs too (some reflected in the un-frozen sections of the lake as they soared by) this was still an impressive photographic experience, especially if you manage to capture the White-tailed Eagles duking it out over fish scraps in the skies.

Just as we prepared to leave the lakeside, I spotted a gorgeous deep-orange Ezo Red Fox emerging from the lakeside behind us. Calling to the rest of the group, the fox strolled out onto the ice by the gathered eagles, with the clear intention of grabbing some fish scraps.

As it approached one White-tailed Eagle it stopped – barely two feet away from the imposing raptor – and snarled, the pair's eyes locked first over the remnants of some fish – and then at each other.

Clearly feeling intimidated, the White-tailed Eagle opened its wings to their full height, towering over the fox – which then jumped back, before giving up its chance of breakfast, and beating a hasty retreat across the ice.

Many of the group – and most of the gathered photographers – had packed their tripods and gear away, so capturing this encounter was a breathless scrabble. But most of us managed to grab a few decent shots and it was, undoubtedly, one of the stand-out moments of our entire tour.

After some last photographs of the fox still padding around the lakeside and car park, we finally pressed on. After a two-hour drive, we were able to stop, for one final time, at the Tsurui Ito Crane Centre, allowing those of us who wanted it a few hours' more chance to photograph the dancing Red-crowned Cranes.

We stopped at our favourite Long-tailed Tit cafe for coffee and hot chocolate, before heading to Kushiro Airport and bringing the end of a long, at times exhausting – but undeniably majestic and magical – tour.